

Turkey's Road to Isolation

This blog post was first posted to the International Centre for Security Analysis blog on the 2nd March 2015.

As Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues to expand the power of the presidency with an eye to [rewriting the constitution](#); his outspoken comments, stubbornness and incoherent foreign policy in the Middle East appear to be pushing Turkey further towards international isolationism. In recent months Turkey's friends seem to be particularly thin on the ground, both in the West and regionally. This is compounded by Turkey's ever clearer authoritarian drift; its apparent reluctance to target ISIS; and its strained relations with neighbouring countries.

Erdoğan's consistent mission statement has been to transform Turkey into a [regional power](#) by promoting his domestic agenda. Rather than isolating Turkey, he instead sees his actions as taking a strong, independent stance, especially in striking out diplomatically against EU and NATO states. However it appears that his actions are having quite the opposite effect, and politically, Turkey is in danger of becoming a non-player in the region.

Turkey's reluctance to fully commit to join the fight against ISIS typified by its refusal to open up the Incirlik Air Base as a base for air strikes in Syria and Iraq has lead the United States to question the [reliability of its NATO ally](#). Turkey's reasoning, perhaps understandably, is that it wishes for air strikes to target the Assad regime in Syria as well as ISIS. However, the result of this stance is that Turkey is now the only major, Muslim majority, country in the Middle East not participating in airstrikes against ISIS. In contrast, [Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt](#) are all actively engaged in bombing missions.

Egypt's air strikes, in particular, have undeniably raised the stature and legitimacy of the Abdel Fatah al-Sisi government in the eyes of many [Western states](#), much to President Erdoğan's irritation. Since Egypt's democratically elected President, Mohammed Morsi was ousted by a military coup in December 2013; Turkish-Egyptian relations have been

frozen. Yet this has both isolated and embarrassed Turkey as many of its regional neighbours, including Turkey's close ally [Qatar](#), have moved to normalise relations.

Furthermore, Turkey's aggressive [anti-Israeli rhetoric](#) does not appear to be subsiding. Only last month, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu tactlessly compared Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the Islamic militants responsible for the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris. A few weeks later Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu decided to pull out of the [Munich Security Conference](#) after learning of Israel's invitation to attend. Ankara's anti-Israeli rhetoric, combined with diplomatic stubbornness and a growing isolation is undermining its aspirations to regional leadership.

It is also evident that Turkey is distancing itself further from the EU member states. Its EU membership bid has practically ground to a halt, and although Turkey's official political line is that it is committed to EU accession, relations are fractured. The Turkish government's recent crackdown on journalists and opposition media has included a Dutch national, [Frederike Geerdink](#), who is currently facing charges of "terrorism propaganda" for writing on the Kurdish issue. This has received public criticism from [EU states](#). Moreover, it seems as though Erdoğan continues to antagonise the EU, asserting in January on his African tour that if Turkey's bid is not accepted, the EU will be seen as an [Islamophobic](#), Christian-only club.

This analysis of Turkey's behaviour forces one to question the motives of its leadership in pursuing this political line. The picture is indeed puzzling. Erdoğan himself declared to journalists at the end of his Latin American tour this month that he was, in fact, [not bothered](#) about the political isolation he was facing on the international scene. Instead, he boldly proclaimed that his fellow leaders envied him, and anyway it is domestic support, not international praise, that is of utmost importance.

He appears to be embracing the concept of "[precious loneliness](#)" espoused by his chief foreign policy advisor, İbrahim Kalın's. This is clearly a deliberate play on the foreign policy doctrine of "[splendid isolation](#)" pursued by Britain in the late 19th century. The President has certainly consolidated a strong following at home winning the August 2014

elections with 51.79 per cent of the vote, and these most recent comments further suggest that Erdoğan is manipulating Turkey's isolation to drum up nationalistic feelings. This is, in part, because of the upcoming elections in June and as Erdoğan looks forward to the centenary of the Turkish republic in 2023, which has been consistently present in the dialogue of the political elite.

However, from an internal as well as international perspective there is serious cause for concern for Turkey continuing down this path of isolation. Although in the short term, Erdoğan's stance against the West and its neighbouring states may play to his advantage domestically. In the long term it could find itself in an alienated position with a tarnished image. More worryingly, this could leave Turkey with a weakened political influence in the international arena at a time when it aspires to lead.